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ABSTRACT

The school improvement movement during the past decade has, among other things, provided educators with realistic data on how effective schools got that way. One of the most basic findings is that successful schools have five common characteristics: principals who provide strong administrative and instructional leadership; high expectations, including a conviction that all the students can and will learn; a school climate that stimulates learning, beginning with a building that is orderly and quiet without being repressive; a schoolwide feeling by students and staff alike that the acquisition of basic skills is urgently important; and a continuous system of monitoring student progress. The path toward excellence involves seven basic steps: (1) acquaint staff with school improvement research; (2) select a school improvement committee, consisting of the principal and representative teachers, parents, and staff; (3) decide on goals; (4) engage in discussions; (5) specify research that addresses the school's needs; (6) draft a written improvement plan; and (7) circulate final document to staff, parents, district officials, the media, community leaders, and others. (TE)

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Implementing School Improvement

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Robert Fredericks and Benjamin Plitch

One of the most exciting phenomena in American education during the past decade has been the school improvement movement, a powerful nationwide drive to assure that children are prepared to meet the new demands of a new, more complex era. Among other things this movement is providing educators with realistic data on how effective schools got that way. School administrators can turn to research findings that have a direct application to the classroom—a body of information that principals can take guidance from as they evaluate their schools and set out to chart their future.

One of the most basic findings is that successful schools are marked by five characteristics (Edmonds 1979). In virtually every instance they have:

- Principals who provide strong administrative and instructional leadership
- High expectations, including a conviction that all of the students can and will learn
- A school climate or environment that stimulates learning, beginning with a building that is orderly and quiet without being repressive
- A schoolwide feeling by students and staff alike that the acquisition of basic skills is urgently important
- A continuous system of monitoring student progress.

Many observers suggest adding another characteristic—that the school has established an overarching mission which everyone understands and feels committed to carry out. In any case, the conviction is that a school that demonstrates these qualities is offering its students a first-rate education, and one that falls short in any of them is in need of overhaul.

One of the attractive features of the school improvement concept is that it is neither mysterious nor reserved for special schools with special students and teachers. In fact, researchers say the path toward excellence involves only seven basic steps, all of them capable of being accomplished within the context of the school's day-to-day operations.

Step 1: The school staff becomes thoroughly knowledgeable both about the relevant school improvement research and about their school's particular weaknesses and needs—exploring possible changes in the way the school functions, the school's policies, and the school's organization. This kind of understanding can be achieved in various ways—through a questionnaire, for example, and through candid discussions among the staff and with parents and other members of the community.

Step 2: The principal selects a school improvement committee whose membership includes, perhaps among others, the principal; two or

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three upper grade teachers and two or three from the lower grades; a specialist teacher; one or two representatives of the teachers union, if there is one; two or three parents, including the president of the PTA; and the secretary or custodian or other representative of the nonteaching staff.

Step 3: With the principal as chair, the committee begins to function, its first task being to decide on a body of goals—in a sense, a philosophy—whose achievement would clearly demonstrate that constructive change has taken place.

Step 4: The committee engages in an intense and far-ranging discussion of what particular outcomes would be considered significant improvement as contrasted simply with change.

Step 5: The committee pinpoints research results that bear on the school's identified needs, notes effective practices in other schools that would seem transferable, and lists the names of experts in the school system who could serve as consultants.

Step 6: A written plan is drafted, for review and comment by the staff (and perhaps others, as appropriate), for feedback to the committee.

Step 7: The final document, incorporating the best thinking that could be turned to, is circulated to the staff; parents; school district officials; the press, TV, and radio; appropriate community leaders; and others who have an interest in the school and its progress.

As an "official" document, the plan thereafter serves as an inspiration, a guide, and a spur. Having created the plan, the teachers feel inspired to do their level best to make sure it works. At the same time, its specifications help steer the committee and the staff in the right direction while reminding all concerned of goals that have yet to be achieved.

Among the numerous school jurisdictions that have begun to explore the school improvement research are the state of Louisiana and the city of Seattle. The needs assessment conducted by Louisiana's state department of education resulted in 13 specific recommendations designed to provide "a framework for improvement" for educators at the building, school district, and state levels (Teddle 1985). "The value to a particular school of any one recommendation," the department's report pointed out, "will obviously vary depending on the current performance level of the students and the staff pertaining to suggested activities." Continuing, the report then added this interesting information:

"The research team visited some schools that impressed us as being extremely well administered and highly effective. Yet invariably, the principal expressed the belief that his/her school could improve in some area."

Moving across the nation to the state of Washington, the Seattle school district's Effective School Project contained a number of elements that are common to most school improvement efforts (Andrews 1985). They included the following: 1) The project was based on the policies of a board of directors; 2) Many constituencies were involved in all phases of the program; 3) The teachers' association was apprised of the plans for collecting and reporting data; 4) School profiles were developed, exhaustively setting down the characteristics of each school; and 5) training sessions were arranged to help those involved make optimum use of the school profiles and also to seek out other data.

Five elements prove to be common to most school improvement undertakings.

As the experiences at Seattle and in Louisiana suggest, the Effective School Movement—basically spawned by former U.S. Secretary of Education Terrel Bell and the department's publication of *A Nation At Risk*—became a powerful and far-reaching force. Models of various approaches to school improvement are now to be found in more than forty states, and "school reform" became a major element in the platform of every candidate, of both parties, for the presidency.

Uniformly from school districts involved in the process come enthusiastic reports of solid achievement. In California, for example, Sycamore Elementary School and Almond Elementary School are said to have made exceptional progress with a school improvement model that focused on reading. As one report (Hallinger and Murphy 1986) put it "The schools can be characterized as 'over-achievers' in the sense that they consistently outperform other California elementary schools serving students of comparable socio-economic background."

Similarly, across the nation in New York City, a school improvement model is reported to have brought

significant improvement in math scores. "Between 1981 and 1985," the report said, "the percentage of students in the district who scored on or above grade level on the citywide mathematics test increased from 43.9 to 61.6" (Harris 1985).

Wherever the school improvement process takes place, and whether initiated within the school or mandated by higher authority, it necessarily will have at least three components—a needs assessment; a functioning, representative committee; and an evaluation arrangement.

The needs assessment: The fundamental requirement of any improvement effort is the development of a game plan—a written statement, for the record, of what needs the project will address and what goals it will pursue. This in turn requires reaching a clear understanding of what the needs *are*. Such an assessment can take several forms, but the most common (and useful) are surveys, using questionnaires, and interviews.

Surveys have several attractions: They are anonymous (and thus may generate more candid answers), they can be quickly and efficiently administered and tabulated, and they allow the committee to reach a cross section of the teachers, students, school workers, parents, and administrators who make up the school community.

The drawbacks are that questionnaires inevitably delimit the areas of concern (restricting them to matters raised in the survey instrument's questions) and preclude discussion of what caused the needs revealed in the survey, how those needs arose, possible solutions, personal feelings, and the like.

Interviews tend to generate much more accurate, comprehensive, and detailed information, particularly if conducted by trained outside personnel. The interview process will often disclose potentially divisive feelings or perceptions and more quickly pinpoint the school's most serious needs. The drawbacks include the length of time needed per interview (usually 45 to 90 minutes); unwillingness on the part of respondents to be frank, because of inhibitions generated by the lack of anonymity; and the complexity of tabulating information that has been collected narratively rather than as quantitative data.

In assessing needs it is a good idea to use both interviews and questionnaires.

No matter what the approach, the assessment process is not likely to be productive unless it accommodates to *perceived* needs—which may not necessarily be the same as "real" needs. For example, if most of the staff is convinced that the school environment is not safe, then the committee had better consider safety to be an area needing attention even if the record shows that there hasn't been an untoward incident at the school for three years.

The optimum needs assessment process begins with interviews conducted with a limited number of representative members of the school community, with particular emphasis on opinion leaders. The findings of these interviews then provide guidelines for construction of a survey questionnaire. The questionnaire is administered to as many members of the school community as possible, tabulated by category (administrators, teachers, other staff, students, parents) and analyzed by the improvement committee. In the ideal, the overall process is managed by a trained outsider.

As the committee discusses and analyzes the data generated by the needs assessment, there must be strict adherence to the following guidelines:

1. Rules of order must prevail in all discussions
2. There must be no blaming, castigating, or finger-pointing
3. The emphasis must always be on the positive (e.g., what could we do to improve the situation?)
4. Targets for improvement must be limited, at least initially, by an agreed-on priority of ranking
5. Improvement is to be achieved within the framework of existing, available resources of personnel.

The improvement committee is the engine of the implementation process; unless this committee does its work well, the project isn't going to go very far. The committee analyzes the data from the needs assessment, prioritizes the findings, determines possible solutions, sets the project's goals, prepares a written plan for achieving those goals, implements the plans, and evaluates the results. Throughout the process the members of the committee must maintain ongoing, two-way communications with their constituencies—informing them of progress, getting feedback, and enlisting their participation in implement-

ing the plan and evaluating the results.

Whatever success the school improvement effort achieves will be determined by the character, dedication, and resolve of the committee, and thus it must be put together with care. There is no "correct" figure for the number of people who should be on it. The only rule is that it must be large enough to be representative and small enough to be functional. A relatively large committee could deal with the largeness problem by breaking up into smaller ad hoc committees that focus on specific needs and possible improvements; for example, a school climate subcommittee might address the issue of discipline.

Experience indicates that a committee with ten to twelve members functions very well. It might include the principal, a representative of the teachers' union, the president of the parent association, an assistant principal, perhaps four teachers, at least one additional parent, a lunchroom worker or custodian or other nonprofessional staff member, and if at all possible, a trained consultant/facilitator to more or less run the operation.

The committee could be formed through an election, by having the principal select its members, or by calling for volunteers. Each approach doubtless has its advantages and disadvantages, depending on the particular circumstances. Elected committee members, for example, may be concerned primarily with their constituencies rather than the improvement of the school, and appointing members might be seen as stacking the deck. In whatever way the members are chosen, the committee will of course need a chairperson to run the meetings and enforce agreed-on rules of order, plus a secretary to maintain a record distributed both to the committee and to the school community.

An issue that inevitably confronts every school improvement effort is the matter of the time members of the committee spend on committee business while also carrying out their regular school responsibilities. This situation has successfully been addressed in a number of ways. In some cases committee members have received pay to attend meetings after regular school hours. Alternatively, some schools have a built-in inservice period at the end of the school day that can be used for this purpose.

Evaluation findings should be conveyed to all concerned—often and regularly.

More often, committees meet voluntarily during the lunch period or before or after school, with meetings being held weekly or perhaps twice-monthly. In practice, if the committee members feel their work is useful and important, they invariably find time for committee work. A wise principal will respond by arranging to provide compensatory time off or additional pay.

Another issue worth considering is the matter of maintaining the interest and support of the school community during what may well be a protracted process of identifying needs and developing long-range plans for dealing with them. The committee can take a useful step in that direction by focusing some of its attention on achievable short-term goals and producing results that demonstrate the validity of the committee's work, thus keeping alive the spirit of the improvement process.

Evaluation: In assessing the impact of the school improvement process, the committee must in effect reexamine each of the identified needs and then determine the relative success of the recommended actions in resolving them, with the results to be presented in a written report.

Another method of evaluation—perhaps to be used to supplement the committee's own analysis—is to recirculate the original survey questionnaire and compare the before-and-after results. Some schools have in fact made this kind of recheck an annual event, conducted each June as an element in planning for the next school year. In addition to comparing questionnaire results, every evaluation should include an analysis of student achievement, using such pre- and post-data as reading and math scores. Such information may not specifically relate to the committee's goals, which will often be more affective in nature, but school improvement activities do not occur in a vacuum. Measurable educational outcomes such as achievement scores are essential elements in assessing a school's progress.

Whether issued as a formal report or as one in a series of committee memoranda, the findings of the evaluation—together with an indication of the thinking behind them—should be circulated to the school community

and to such concerned others as the school board, school district officials, and parents. Such reports should be issued at least once each year, providing an annual accounting of how well the school is doing and an annual spur to renewed effort. The ambitiousness of the report—the scope and the depth of detail—will largely be determined by whether it is prepared by members of the committee, in their "spare" time, or by an outside change agent or facilitator who has in effect been the committee's manager.

While many school improvement projects include such an outside person as a member of the committee—someone trained in the change process—the more usual arrangement is for an *internal* change agent. Internal change agents are normally drawn from the school community and usually are either a teacher, an assistant principal, or a representative of the teachers' union.

The benefits of arranging for an internal change agent include the fact that there is little or no additional cost to the school, a stronger sense of ownership or control on the part of all involved, and a greater sense of familiarity and trust on the part of the school community. The drawbacks are serious and include the fact that the internal change agent is probably not trained in the skills and processes involved in facilitating school improvement, can devote only limited time to the project, is not in a position to order anyone to take on any particular responsibility, and runs such risks as being perceived as partial to a particular group or point of view and blamed if certain actions do not turn out well or are not accomplished in a timely fashion.

Some of these drawbacks can be overcome by having the *principal* serve as internal change agent, and there are some distinct advantages to that arrangement: The principal is already the school's instructional and administrative leader, has the authority to mandate the implementation of change, exercises some control over the budgetary considerations necessary to the achievement of change, and has the strongest vested interest in making sure that the improvement process works. Moreover, the principal's time is less structured than is that of most staff members, allowing for greater flexibility in dealing with the various aspects of the project.

School improvement is far more likely to occur if there is a strong leader.

But, even assuming meticulous consultation with the other members of the committee and anyone else with an opinion, the principal can easily be perceived as dictating decisions rather than just being a participant in the committee's deliberations. The principal will be suspected by some of having a secret agenda and of seeking to manipulate the committee in order to achieve it. As the school's chief evaluation officer, the principal might be charged with having a conflict of interest as regards both the identification of needs and the evaluation of the school's success. Moreover, while the principal's time may be more flexible, it is not likely to be more available. All in all, there is considerable risk that the principal will be viewed as unduly influencing the committee, thereby undermining its credibility and that of the overall process.

At any rate, the school improvement is far more likely to occur if there is someone who keeps the committee on track; takes responsibility for seeing to it that the details of the process are properly handled; coordinates all activities; oversees the documentation of the needs assessment and the recommendations and the other aspects of the committee's work; and in general provides energetic, stimulating leadership. While the various tasks can be accomplished by the committee as a whole or delegated to individual committee members, a project of this nature needs to have someone at the helm, lest the axiom about too many cooks be demonstrated once again.

Regardless of the kind of change agent, no school improvement project is likely to work unless the recommended changes are developed and implemented on the basis of consensus. An enthusiastic, stimulating change agent can greatly improve the efficiency of the process, and it is important that the committee be made up of lively, hard-working people dedicated to helping the school achieve its potential.

The project must "belong," however, to the overall school community. New ways of doing things can be imposed, but truly constructive change—a change in spirit and aspiration—will not occur unless those involved feel that their contributions have had an impact and that the new approaches reflect to at least some degree their values and aspirations.

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